

THE SPIRIT IN JOHN'S GOSPEL
Rev. Joseph Ponessa, July 2012

The Spirit appears everywhere in Scripture, from the first chapter where the Spirit hovers over the water, to the last chapter where the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!" Everywhere in Scripture the Spirit speaks, but sometimes the Spirit is also the subject matter. Nowhere is the teaching about the Spirit more profound than in the Gospel according to Saint John. John was inspired to write, like the other authors of Scripture, but he seems to have had a heightened consciousness of the role of the Spirit in his writings. Without John's gospel, we would be deprived of some of our most central notions of Who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does. In the next couple of pages we will review what John says about the Spirit, but in reverse order.

John Chapter 20

When the Risen Lord appears to the disciples for the first time, "on the evening" of Easter Sunday, his first words to them are: "Peace be with you. ... Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:19-22). The remarkable thing about this passage is that Jesus gives the Spirit to his disciples on Easter Day itself, not fifty days later as seems to happen in Acts. Now Luke was an excellent reporter, and the church relies upon him for the liturgical calendar of Easter Season, with forty days separating Easter and Ascension, and then ten days separating Ascension and Pentecost Sunday. John probably knew all about it—because he was there! What he remembers, though, is more: that the Spirit was in fact at work already from Easter Day itself. The disciples had to wait until Pentecost to receive the other gifts of the Spirit, but the charism of forgiveness did not have to wait, and the presence of the Spirit was required for that. The Spirit helped Peter and the others select a replacement for Judas, but that was before Pentecost Day itself, and that is the sequence in Luke's own writing. Therefore it would be an error to interpret Luke as saying the Spirit first appeared only at Pentecost.

A similar error is to think that we receive the Holy Spirit for the first time in the Sacrament of Confirmation. We were baptized "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and if the Spirit were not present at our baptism, we would not be baptized. What we receive at Confirmation is the seven gifts of the Spirit, but we have already been filled with the Spirit since the moment of our baptism. The apostles were filled with the Spirit from Easter Day, but received the charisms of the Spirit at Pentecost. So John clarifies what Luke had written.

John Chapters 14/15/16

During his Last Supper discourse as recorded in John's gospel, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit under a unique title found nowhere else in the Bible. He calls the Holy Spirit "the Paraclete" (14:14-17, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-14), which is variously translated as Counselor or Advocate. He does not mean for this title to belong exclusively to the Spirit, because at one point he calls the Spirit "another Paraclete," as if the Spirit were one in a series.

Perhaps Jesus Himself is the First Paraclete, and the Spirit is the successor to Jesus as a Second Paraclete. There is also a possibility that John the Baptist is the First Paraclete, Jesus is the Second and the Spirit is the third. For all we know, there may have been an even greater series. The Prophet Isaiah was told "Comfort ye my people." So all the prophets in that sense were paracletes in their own time. They prepared the way for God's own comfort, which would come in the Person of Jesus and the Person of the Spirit. The term Paraclete may have a legal connotation, as the person who prosecutes evil-doers and defends the innocent. However, the relationship is not merely a formal one and should not be reduced to the sphere of law. The arrival of the Paraclete is already a comfort, even before the divine tribunal convenes to administer justice. The Paraclete is the spirit of truth, who will ensure that nothing but true testimony will be offered to the judge. In Mosaic law, no perjury could be admitted into the hearings without turning the court into a sacrilege. The truth will set us free, and the Spirit of truth ensures that the liberating truth will prevail.

John Chapter 7

Receding earlier into the first half of John's gospel, the Spirit appears under the symbol of water (7:38-39). The context was the Feast of Booths, when the priests circumambulated the altar of sacrifice seven times, pouring water upon the altar and its environs. Since the altar was a place of bloody sacrifice, it needed to be washed occasionally for sanitary purposes. But the water was also of ritual purification. Should even the smallest blemish have gone unnoticed upon even a single lamb sacrificed in the course of a year, the altar would need to be ritually cleansed. Jesus makes an analogy between that ritual and his own ministry, and John gives the explanation that he was speaking about the Spirit who had yet to come.

In our minds the Spirit is normally pictured as tongues of flame, after the Pentecost event. But more frequently in Scripture, the Spirit is associated with water. Remember how the Spirit hovers over the waters of creation in Genesis. Remember how the Spirit appears in the form of a dove over the waters of the Jordan at the baptism of the Lord, which is recounted in all four of the gospels. So it is hardly surprising that John would link the waters of the Feast of Booths and Jesus' remarks on that occasion with the Spirit. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness," and the Spirit creates the thirst that only the waters that flow from the side of Christ can satisfy.

John Chapter 6

Speaking of hungers in the previous chapter, Jesus had said "the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51) and "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (6:56). Soon thereafter he again speaks of the Spirit: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63).

Non-Eucharistic Christians, who do not celebrate the banquet of the Lord's table, point to that last verse as a proof text that Jesus meant his invitation to participate in his flesh and blood in a figurative sense. But as we already have begun to see, in John's gospel Jesus invokes the Spirit after nearly every major event. This is a pattern, and in so doing he

clearly does not intend to nullify every one of his actions. The arrival of the Spirit makes possible the Eucharist, just as it makes possible every one of the sacraments. Yes, the priest says the words of consecration, but he also invokes the Spirit, and if the Spirit were not present the priest would confect nothing.

The Spirit of truth makes the words of Jesus true, and does not prove them false. How bizarre that the Spirit of Jesus should be invoked against the Words of Jesus. Underlying this is a false metaphysics, of a physical world that ceases to exist when the spiritual comes to play. Rather, our religion is based upon the Incarnation, the Spirit in the Flesh. Flesh without spirit is useless, but real Spiritual Flesh saves the world by dying on the Cross, and feeds human beings in the distribution of the Eucharist."

John Chapter 4

The Lord Jesus tells the Samaritan woman: "But the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ... God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (4:21/24). At the time Jesus spoke, the Samaritan temple had already been destroyed, and within fifty years the Jerusalem temple too would be destroyed. Samaritans and Jews had worshiped only within their proper temples. Jesus offered both groups the consolation of knowing that God would be pleased to accept worship from any locality on the planet, not just in the traditional cultic centers. By no means does Jesus indicate that gathering for prayer is irrelevant. This is the same Jesus who says, "He who does not gather with me scatters." John says of him, "He will draw all people to himself." The church is the assembly of believers, and while we each believe within we witness together, to each other. The Spirit gives us the yearning to find other believers with whom to worship the Father.

John Chapters 1/3

Jesus told Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:5/6). By now we should not be surprised to find that Jesus brings the Spirit into his teaching on baptism. We have already seen the Spirit in connection with worship, eucharist, forgiveness, resurrection and final judgment. Baptism is the first entry of supernatural grace into the soul, but already before baptism the Spirit has been at work preparing our souls to receive this gift, the divine life within.

John the Evangelist was probably a disciple of John the Baptist before he came over to follow Jesus (1:35-39). He had already heard the Baptist testify to the Spirit: "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven" (1:32) and heard him prophesy about the role of the Spirit in the mission of Jesus: "this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (1:33). So the teaching on baptism in chapter three should be seen in the light of the prophecy in chapter one. The Word became flesh in order to baptize in the Spirit. Human beings are beings of flesh and blood first, and only then come to be baptized. Our fallen flesh is a problem for us, but an opportunity for God. Thus our fleshliness is no impediment to the Spirit, but the raw material for the Spirit to work with. Spirit transforms flesh. As the saying goes, "Grace builds on nature."